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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E,
LONDON AND PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/11/2018
TAGS: [EWWT](#) [ECON](#) [PINR](#) [PGOV](#) [ER](#)
SUBJECT: ASSAB - ERITREA'S USELESS PORT

REF: 07 ASMARA 615

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for Reason 1.4 (d)

11. (C) UNMEE Chief of Mission Support Maurice Critchley (protect) informed Emboff the port of Assab may be unusable. In the course of his duties with UNMEE, Critchley has transited Assab numerous times when traveling by UN flights between Eritrea and Ethiopia. (Note: UNMEE's flight between Eritrea and Ethiopia routinely stopped in Assab. End Note.) He commented he has never seen a container ship in port. While Critchley noted the docks' cranes are all vertically erect and appear to be undamaged, he has never seen them operate or observed any maintenance being performed on them. He added that the captain of an Indian cargo vessel carrying UNMEE supplies to Assab two years ago had expressed grave reservations about bringing his ship into harbor, claiming the presence of significant silting. Critchley also observed that the Eritrean government had instructed UNMEE several months ago to ship the UN's vehicles and cargo overland from Assab to the operational port of Massawa, rather than utilizing the seemingly more convenient port in Assab.

12. (C) IMF statistics show a sharp decrease in cargo entering the port of Assab since the border war with Ethiopia in 1998. Prior to 1998, Assab served primarily as Ethiopia's main port for importing goods by sea. When this market was lost, Assab became, in effect, useless, given its remoteness from the rest of Eritrea and the lack of a secondary market in country. As a result, Eritrea's port of Massawa, closer to Eritrea's population centers, has become the logical port of choice for Eritrean shipping. Given the cash-strapped Eritrean government's need to make hard choices among competing funding priorities, the Eritreans have clearly chosen not to invest in Assab, at least until such time that relations and trade will normalize with neighboring Ethiopia.
MCMULLEN